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# Students of the Foreign<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to offer an afterword to this collection of essays with the hope of briefly conceptualizing these two meetings of Student-Scholars and offering some suggestions on how to approach student-scholarship from a foreign point of view.

First of all – what is a Student-Scholar? To begin with, the very notion of a “student-scholar” or “student-scholarship” is a contradiction in terms in its combination of two seemingly diametrically opposed concepts. At first glance, we could define this difference between what either party knows. We are able to recognize Scholars because they possess knowledge that is “authorized,” “professional,” and “intellectually mature” in contradistinction to the Student’s knowledge, which is “unauthorized,” “amateurish,” intellectually “childish,” or “naïve.” In fact, one Ivy League graduate school locates the very point at which a Student transitions into a Scholar by stating that the Ph.D. dissertation “heralds your transformation from a consumer to a producer of knowledge.” Thus, the authorization of Students to call themselves Scholars occurs through the academic practices of completing graduate programs, publishing in professional journals,

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<sup>1</sup> A version of the following essay was presented at the Russian State University for the Humanities colloquium for Student-Scholars entitled “From a Foreign Point of View: Student Readings of Russian and American Culture” on 24 April 2008. “Students of the Foreign” was presented as the opening remarks to the gathering.

reviewing the research of one's peers, presenting research at professional conferences, keeping in mind all the while that these rites of passages are controlled and supervised by an academy populated by those who have already completed it.

Yet, recent trends in literary criticism have begun to call into question the transcendental nature of rigid binary pairs, many of which are located in the reading and interpretation of cultural texts. Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" fixes as the object of his criticism the binarism of "authorized" and "unauthorized" interpretation of a text, connecting "authorized" readings with the sanctified personality of the "Author-God." He explains:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. . . . In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than approaching our cultural texts in hopes of "deciphering" fixed meanings, we are then compelled to view what we are researching as a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." What does this have to say to the Student-Scholar distinction? It compels us to move towards the realization that the preferencing of "authorized" Scholarly readings over "unauthorized" Student ones emerges out of the distinction between the processes which authorized who is permitted to "produce" knowledge and who is forced to "consume" it, disregarding the majority of readings, interpretations, interactions, intersections, denials, refusals, affirmations, inspirations, and discoveries that occur during these moments of "unauthorized" Student readings. The move away from an understanding of the "work" as singular, monolithic, and

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147.

coherent towards the valuation of the subjectivity of the reader and his or her multiple points of view threatens the clarity and stability of the Student-Scholar distinction if the “authorized,” “legitimized,” “mature” scholarly readings turn out to be only one voice in the polyphony of possible readings. Thus, the decentralization and deauthorization of knowledge from the academy commemorates the “Death of the Scholar” and the “Birth of the Student,” and it is in this movement away from the Scholar-God unlocking the meanings of texts that the variety of readings that texts sustain necessitates the creation of a colloquium dedicated to Student-Scholarship, a conference where Student-Scholars are permitted to explore their own subjectivities, suspended in a particular historical, cultural, and linguistic moment.

This brings me to my second question – what does it mean to be a Student of the Foreign? Perhaps, it would be better to first ask, can one be a *Scholar* of the Foreign? This undoubtedly sounds strange, for someone calling themselves a Scholar of the Foreign makes a claim of authority over that which is epistemologically not their own. A Scholar of a foreign culture does not possess a native’s knowledge, language, customs, or culture, and consequently is an intruder, an interloper, claiming a position of authority and privilege that may fundamentally differ from the perspectives generated from within the culture. We can easily put the Foreigner-Native opposition along the same axis as we have with the Student-Scholar. Taking America, for example, I as a native in the old view would have privileged positions, perspectives, and knowledge of American culture, authorized primarily by the fact that I was born in the United States, possess an insider’s knowledge of its language, history, customs, and culture, and myself actively participate in and prolong its traditions and cultural processes. In comparison with my readings of American life, the interpretations generated beyond the country’s borders would then be unauthorized until having undergone the American right of passage of being a citizens, thus, making the transition from possessing outsider’s to insider’s knowledge.

If we put this Foreign-Native paradigm under the same scrutiny, however, one immediately comes to realize that the reason why all of us are here today is because one of the most

valuable routes to achieving higher levels of understanding about our own cultures and the foreign ones that we study is intimately connected to searching out, collecting, and evaluating as many possible readings of our respective cultures as possible, or put differently, seeing ourselves from a Foreign Point of View. We can see that those of us who study the Foreign, research the Foreign, and dive deep into the minutia of the Foreign that may otherwise be overlooked by Natives – we generate the very multiplicity of readings that the post-structuralist Student-Scholar calls for, mindful that the identity of the texts we study is ever unstable, shifting, and amorphous and – strangely – dependent upon and constituted by us. The readings generated through interactions with the foreign not only reconstitute, reconstrue, and reenvision the text, but are in fact integral to its being.

So what I would like to propose, then, is that those of us who study that which is not our own – that which is alien, strange, different, or, simply, foreign – are constantly reminded of our status as Students with a capital S, reminded that we are going to be lifelong consumers of the knowledge of the other. We all participated in these two conferences to meditate upon, call attention to, and celebrate the intersections and divergences of different cultures and what we have to teach each other. Each of us simultaneously embodied the roles of Students and Scholars and were transformed into Students of that which is our own. In other words, the participants of both conferences collectively took the first, crucial step towards an understanding of just exactly what it means to be a Student of the Foreign